

KNOW! HOW TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT SUICIDE

Meet the Author



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John Ackerman, PhD, is a child clinical psychologist and Suicide Prevention Clinical Manager for the Center for Suicide Prevention and Research at Nationwide Children's Hospital. He works with schools and community organizations across Ohio to implement evidence-based suicide prevention strategies and supports training in suicide screening and risk assessment for behavioral health and healthcare professionals.

Dr. Ackerman's research focuses on risk factors for youth suicidal behavior, mood disorders, and suicide prevention. He has also studied the impact of media reporting on youth suicide and trained Ohio journalists on best practices for discussing suicide.

Some parents worry that talking about suicide will put the idea into a child's head. However, research shows that calm, direct conversations about suicide do not cause suicidal thoughts.¹ These conversations instead open the door to help and make it more likely that a young person will tell someone when they are struggling. Parents do not need to have all the answers. What matters most is being willing to ask, listen, and stay connected.

"Talking about Suicide with Your Kids is One of the Most Important Conversations a Parent Can Have"

KNOW! HOW TO START EARLY—AND KEEP TALKING ²

There is no perfect age to begin talking about mental health and suicide prevention. The conversation should change as children grow, but the basic message can remain the same: "You can talk to me about anything, and we will figure out what to do together."

With younger children and preteens, conversations may focus primarily on feelings, coping with difficult situations, friendships, bullying, and knowing when to ask an adult for help. With teens, parents can be more direct about depression, suicide, self-harm, relationships, social media, and other challenges that can affect mental health.



5 Natural Times to Talk About Suicide ²

- In the car, when you are side by side rather than face to face
- During a walk or other low-key activity
- After a challenging day at school
- When a friend is having a hard time
- When something about mental health or suicide comes up in the news, entertainment, or social media



Go Beyond "How Was Your Day?" ⁶

Ask open-ended questions that encourage young people to share more about their experiences and feelings.

- "What's been the hardest part of your week?"
- "What has been stressing you out lately?"
- "How are your friends doing?"

KNOW! TO RECOGNIZE WARNING SIGNS ⁴

Most children and teens who experience stress, sadness, anxiety, or other difficulties will not attempt suicide. However, parents should look for meaningful changes in their child's behavior, particularly when several occur together or persist over time. **Warning signs can include:**

- Pulling away from family, friends, or activities
- Losing interest in things they usually enjoy

- Major changes in mood, sleep, or eating
- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Self-injury
- Talking about feeling hopeless, trapped, alone, or like a burden
- Talking or posting about death or suicide
- Searching online for information related to suicide or death
- Giving away important possessions or saying goodbye in an unusual way

A single bad day or an intense display of emotions does not necessarily signal a crisis. But when something feels different about your child, or you see warning signs, be sure to check in.



Understanding the Risks ³

Certain factors can increase a young person's vulnerability to suicide, including mental health concerns, previous suicidal behavior or self-harm, substance use, bullying, trauma, loss, family or relationship conflict, and a family history of suicide. Access to firearms, medications, or other lethal means can increase danger during a crisis.

Risk factors are not predictions. They signal when it may be especially important to pay attention, stay connected, and offer support.

KNOW! To Ask Directly, If You're Worried ⁵

Parents may avoid asking about suicide because they fear making things worse, but direct questions are appropriate when you're concerned.

Start with what you've noticed:

"I've noticed you've seemed really down lately and haven't wanted to do things you usually enjoy. I'm worried about you. How are you doing?"

If your concerns continue, ask directly:

"Sometimes when people feel overwhelmed or hopeless, they think about suicide. Have you been having thoughts about suicide?"

Asking about suicide does not put the idea in a child's head. It shows them they can talk with you and get help.

KNOW! How To Respond and Connect to Help ^{3,4,5}

If Your Child Says "Yes" Stay calm, thank them for telling you, and listen without judgment. Focus on understanding before trying to solve the problem.

Helpful responses include:

- "Thank you for telling me."
- "I'm glad you told me. You're not in trouble."
- "You don't have to handle this alone."
- "We're going to get help, and I'll stay with you."

Your child does not need a perfect response. They need to know that you believe them, care about them, and are willing to help. If your child is experiencing suicidal thoughts, seek professional help promptly or call the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

If you believe your child may be in immediate danger, stay with them, reduce access to potentially lethal means, and seek emergency assistance.

RESOURCES

- [Safety Plan](#)
- [Nationwide Childrens Suicide Prevention Resources](#)
- [Text or call the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988](#)
- [Crisis Text Line: Text "HOME" to 741-741](#)
- Helpful apps:
 - [MY3](#)
 - [Mood Tools](#)

SOURCES

1. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24998511/>
2. <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/family-resources-education/700childrens/2018/08/suicide-conversation-with-kids>
3. <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/conditions/suicidal-behaviors>
4. <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/specialties/behavioral-health/for-families/suicide-prevention-resources/suicide-warning-signs-and-how-to-respond>
5. <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/specialties/behavioral-health/for-families/suicide-prevention-resources/your-child-has-thought-about-ending-their-life>
6. <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/family-resources-education/700childrens/2016/08/talking-to-your-kids-about-depression-and-suicide>

Scan for additional Know!
Prevention Tips for Everyone:

